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## THE NAVAL CAREER OF JOHN ELIOT, GOVERNOR OF WEST FLORIDA

by ROBERT R. REA\*

THE ROYAL NAVY offered a promising career to the younger sons of many an English county family in the eighteenth century, and when political influence could be brought to bear, prospects for rapid advancement were considerably increased. The case of John Eliot offers an interesting example of the making of a naval officer during the Seven Years War and demonstrates the heights to which family connections could raise a very young man, for Eliot's elevation to the governorship of the colony of West Florida at the age of twenty-four far surpassed the claims of his service at sea. Eliot's naval career is none the less fascinating and deserving of more than the cursory, inaccurate notice it has hitherto received, and recent research makes possible for the first time something more than a hypothetical explanation of his sudden death at Pensacola.<sup>1</sup>

John Eliot was born June 2, 1742, the third son of Richard and Harriot Craggs Eliot of Port Eliot, Cornwall. His grandfather, William Eliot, had been a naval officer, but John's father was a politician who developed an impressive parliamentary interest in the Cornish boroughs of St. Germans and Liskeard. Richard Eliot's oldest son, Edward (b. 1727), was destined to

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1. Two persons confuse the record: John Elliott, surgeon aboard *Augusta* (Muster Roll, *Augusta*: ADM 36/4780, Public Record Office, London) whose correspondence with the Admiralty is incorrectly filed with that of Captain John Eliot in ADM 1/1760. John William Elliott (1732-1808) was the third son of Sir Gilbert Elliott of Minto, who served as midshipman under Hamilton in *Augusta* and won fame by defeating Thurot off Ireland in 1760; he is confused with John Eliot by Alan Valentine, *The British Establishment, 1760-1784* 2 vols. (Norman, Oklahoma, 1970), I, 295. John Charnock's sketch of Eliot in *Biographia Navalis* (London, 1794-98), VI, 391, has as many lacunae as errors. Even the College of Heralds has erred by describing Eliot as governor of East Florida! I have dealt with Eliot's family life and gubernatorial tenure in "John Eliot, Second Governor of British West Florida," *Alabama Review*, XXX (October 1977), 243-65. certain portions of which are herein amended and corrected.

follow his father's lead in politics and would end his days as Baron of St. Germans. The second son, Richard (b. 1733), went to sea aboard HMS *Augusta*, Captain John Hamilton. Richard was carried on the ship's muster roll as captain's servant from 1744 until 1746 when he became a midshipman. Quite tragically, this promising lad died at Kinsale, Ireland, April 28, 1747, while serving with Hamilton.<sup>2</sup> Late the next year the senior Richard Eliot also died, and in 1749 Captain Hamilton married the widowed Hariot. Seven-year-old John Eliot became a member of their household.

As portrayed by Joshua Reynolds, Captain John Hamilton was a very handsome, swashbuckling naval officer. The second son of the Earl of Abercorn, Hamilton secured his captaincy in 1741, enjoyed some modest successes at sea, and sat on the famous court martial of two admirals, nine captains, and four lieutenants after the battle of Toulon. He was much at Plymouth and became an intimate member of the household at Port Eliot, included by Reynolds in his painting of the Eliot family. Edward Eliot remembered him as "a very uncommon character; very obstinate, very whimsical, very pious, and a rigid disciplinarian, yet very kind to his men."<sup>3</sup> His correspondence fully supports that judgment and discloses a commander who was deeply concerned for his sailors' spiritual as well as their physical welfare, a captain all too ready to rebuke an admiral whom he found wanting, and an officer who, in 1755, sacrificed himself in order that his crewmen might be saved from drowning. Perhaps only his wife knew that John Hamilton disliked the sea and the service to which he gave his life. Hamilton undoubtedly helped to shape the character and the career of young John Eliot. A second family naval connection was formed in 1751 when John's eldest sister Anne married Captain Hugh Bonfoy, who had succeeded Hamilton in command of *Augusta* in 1747.

Eliot's naval career began February 18, 1752, when he was signed as midshipman on *Penzance*, Captain Charles Saunders, at Portsmouth. At the end of May, Saunders sailed to Plymouth where, on June 12, Eliot was listed as an able-bodied seaman. That summer *Penzance* cruised to St. John's, Newfoundland,

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2. ADM 36/193.

3. Sir James Prior, *Life of Edmund Malone* (London, 1860), 405.

returning to Woolwich for refitting just after Christmas. Whether or not John Eliot actually saw sea duty as a nine- or ten-year-old midshipman, he was discharged at Woolwich, at his own request, March 19, 1753. By that date his brother-in-law, Hugh Bonfoy, had succeeded Captain Saunders, and on May 12, Eliot rejoined *Penzance* as midshipman, volunteer. He was certainly one of the "nine quarterdeck gentlemen" whom Captain Bonfoy carried on *Penzance's* annual summer voyage to Newfoundland in 1753.<sup>4</sup> Bonfoy sailed again in 1754, but Eliot was discharged at Plymouth, July 8, and on August 10, he was signed A.B. on *Vanguard*, a ship which remained snug in the docks until the following March.<sup>5</sup> Eliot was listed as midshipman, November 10, 1754, and probably spent that winter in school and with the Hamiltons. In February 1755, his mother was called upon to replenish John's naval wardrobe, for his clothes were very thin and much mended. He was particularly in need of checked shirts, pea jackets, trousers, and stockings, and his grandmother was asked to provide the young midshipman with the mandatory supply of white dress shirts.<sup>6</sup>

In the spring of 1755, the Royal Navy girded itself for war with France, and Captain John Byron took *Vanguard*, with Midshipman Eliot aboard, out of the Plymouth docks in March for a brief shake-down cruise. When trying to sail again in July, the ship struck an unmarked rock in Plymouth harbor, and Byron only got to sea in August when he beat about for six weeks off Cape Finisterre. A further cruise in October and November was profitable in terms of captured French shipping, but wind and sea fully justified "Foul-Weather Jack" Byron's reputation for considerably less than good fortune.<sup>7</sup>

In March 1756, *Vanguard* joined Sir Edward Hawke off Ushant for two months, and in June, Midshipman Eliot saw

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4. Muster Books, *Penzance*: ADM 36/2460; Captain's Log, *Penzance*: ADM 51/684; Correspondence of Captain Hugh Bonfoy: ADM 1/1485.

5. Paybook, *Vanguard*: ADM 33/418.

6. John Eliot to Harriot Hamilton, February 4, 1755: Eliot MSS. John mentions that he carried about three dozen shirts when he sailed with Captain Bonfoy and now needs two dozen more. He was less generously supplied than his brother Richard had been. Harriot Hamilton to "Dear Cos," February 6, 1755.

7. Captain's Log, *Vanguard*: ADM 51/1026. Captain John Hamilton, who had been given command of Lancaster, was a victim of these same storms.

action in the Bay of Biscay. The squadron was engaged in disrupting French coastal shipping, and early in August it succeeded in chasing ashore two French frigates with a convoy of twenty-nine merchant vessels. Boats were launched in an attempt to burn the Frenchmen, but musketry from the shore drove them off. A further cruise in November and December produced small results. The weather off Cape Finisterre was severe, the ships were leaky, and all hands aboard *Vanguard* were engaged at the pumps. Byron returned to Plymouth, January 29, 1757, and John Eliot left his ship on February 9.<sup>8</sup> The fourteen-year-old midshipman was discharged by preferment to *Marlborough*, Captain Robert Faulknor, the flagship of Rear Admiral Thomas Cotes who was preparing to sail from Portsmouth to take command of the Jamaica station. Eliot joined *Marlborough* on a blustery February 14, and a new phase of his career began.<sup>9</sup>

On March 10, 1757, *Marlborough* sailed from Portsmouth, and when she was able to beat out of Torbay a week later, she had 113 ships in convoy. After a rough Atlantic crossing she anchored at Port Royal, Jamaica, on May 17. All hands, from the admiral to young Midshipman Eliot, looked forward to meeting the enemy, but unfortunately *Marlborough's* first cruise proved her to be such a poor sailer in the light Caribbean breezes that she was unable to make headway against Jamaican currents. While others gained glory and took prizes, Cotes's flagship remained idle and in October was finally tied up at the wharf, her guns removed.<sup>10</sup> Earlier that month Captain Arthur Forrest in *Augusta* had daringly and successfully challenged a powerful French squadron off the south coast of St. Domingue, and on October 25, *Augusta* and her companions, *Dreadnought* and *Edinburgh*, returned to Port Royal "much disabled in their masts and rigging." With the first news of Forrest's exploit, Eliot sought permission from the admiral to transfer to a more active ship, and as soon as *Augusta* was anchored, he went aboard as third lieutenant, accompanied by his servant John Arnold. That same day *Augusta* received a new first lieutenant in the person of George Johnstone, and although neither could have guessed it

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8. Captain's Log, *Vanguard*: ADM 51/1026; Paybooks, *Vanguard*: ADM 32/173; 33/540.

9. Muster Roll, *Marlborough*: ADM 36/6057.

10. Captain's Log, *Marlborough*: ADM 51/576.

at the moment, the first two royal governors of the future colony of West Florida became shipmates.<sup>11</sup>

*Augusta* was quickly repaired, returned to sea, and Eliot soon saw action under the aggressive Forrest. The day before Christmas they were briskly engaged off Mayaguana, having shown a Dutch flag in order to close with French ships. On another occasion Forrest flew French colors as a ruse to gain the advantage of his enemy. In January 1758, there was hot work with the ship's boats cutting out French merchantmen huddling under the shadow of Cape Tiburon. By June, *Augusta* had taken numerous prizes. Forrest was the hero of the Jamaica Squadron, but all his officers did not enjoy the same standing. As the result of some undisclosed peccadillo, on June 14 Lieutenant George Johnstone, who had been brought before a court martial in February for insubordination, was further "suspended for disrespect" toward Admiral Cotes. Eliot might have hoped to move up, but *Augusta* was by then in such bad shape from constant action that she required extensive repairs, so her sixteen-year-old third lieutenant exchanged with the lieutenant of the sloop *Viper*, and on July 31 began to serve under Captain Housman Broadley, whom Thomas Cotes would eulogize as "an active, gallant officer."<sup>12</sup>

*Viper* was kept busy during the latter half of 1758, and at the end of January 1759, she was cruising in company with *Marlborough* and *Dreadnought* off Cape François. At 5 a.m., January 30, Captain Broadley succumbed to a fever; two hours later young Lieutenant Eliot went aboard *Dreadnought* and received orders to take temporary command of the sloop. His first task was to bury his late captain, and at ten o'clock Eliot

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11. Muster Roll, *Augusta*: ADM 36/4782. Cotes's commission to Eliot, October 25, 1757, was confirmed August 6, 1759: ADM 6/19. Johnstone was twenty-seven at this time and had held his lieutenant's certificate since 1749; in spite of being twelve years younger than Johnstone, Eliot would secure his captaincy earlier and enjoy twenty-eight months seniority over Johnstone in the Navy List. On the first governor of West Florida see Robin F. A. Fabel, "Bombast and Broad sides: The Lives of George Johnstone," which has been accepted for publication by Troy State University Press.
  12. Captain's Log, *Augusta*: ADM 51/3774; Muster Roll, *Augusta*: ADM 36/4783; "A Journal kept by John Eliot Third Lieutenant of His Majesty's Ship the *Augusta*": ADM L/A. 235 National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. Cotes's commission to Eliot, July 31, 1758, was confirmed September 4, 1759: ADM 6/19.

read the brief service, two volleys of small arms were fired, and the body of Housman Broadley was consigned to the sea. Eliot's command of *Viper* was brief. On the morning of February 1, Captain Arthur Ussher was sent aboard from *Dreadnought*, and Eliot resumed his lieutenancy until he left *Viper*, April 4, at Port Royal.<sup>13</sup>

Eliot enjoyed the favor of both the glamorous Captain Forrest and the plodding Admiral Cotes (whose postings were subsequently confirmed by the Admiralty so that Eliot never stood examination for his lieutenant's certificate). On April 5, 1759, Cotes appointed Eliot lieutenant on *Hornet*, Captain Charles Napier, and in June the young heroes of the West Indies sailed with the homeward bound convoy, arriving at Sheerness in late August.<sup>14</sup>

In the meantime John's brother, Edward Eliot, had begun to exercise the family's influence in his behalf. Early in 1759, their sister Elizabeth became engaged to Charles Cocks of Eastnor, and that marriage (which took place August 8) would establish a connection with the First Lord of the Admiralty, George Anson, whose wife, Elizabeth Yorke, was the daughter of Margaret Cocks, Lady Hardwicke, Charles Cocks's aunt. The fortunes of eighteenth-century families depended upon just such relationships. In February, Edward Eliot had written to Anson regarding the coming nuptials and urging that something be done by the First Lord for his prospective relative-by-marriage Lieutenant John Eliot. Anson was not one to welcome political intrusions into naval affairs, but in this case he satisfied both the demands of the service and the obligations of family by advising Edward Eliot that he had already arranged for young John to be appointed captain of the sloop *Hawke*.<sup>15</sup>

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13. Master's Log, *Viper*: ADM 52/1091; Lieutenant's Log, *Viper*: ADM L/V.76 (Nat. Maritime Mus.); Cotes to Admiralty, February 28, 1759: ADM 1/235.

14. Captain's Log, *Hornet*: ADM 51/458; Muster Table, *Hornet*: ADM 36/5789. Eliot was discharged September 5, 1759. Cotes's commission to Eliot, April 5, 1759, was confirmed September 4, 1759: ADM 6/19. John Eliot to Admiralty, endorsed September 21, 1759: ADM 1/1760. After extensive refitting, *Hornet* next went into action in 1760 under the command of George Johnstone.

15. Anson to Edward Eliot, February 6, 1759. See Richard Middleton, "Pitt, Anson and the Admiralty, 1756-1761," *History*, LV (June 1970), 191-93.

Lieutenant Eliot was not long returned to England before Lord Anson's promise was fulfilled. On September 4, 1759, Eliot was commissioned as commander of *Hawke*, and on the twenty-seventh he went aboard at Plymouth. October was spent readying ship and trying to secure and retain a crew, for his petty officers and foremast men were regularly transferred to larger vessels putting out to sea; but by November young Eliot was embarked upon his first-and as it proved, brief-independent command.<sup>16</sup>

The course of the little twelve-gun sloop *Hawke* cannot be traced, for want of surviving records, but she was probably cruising off the French coast on December 9, 1759, detached from Sir Edward Hawke's squadron.<sup>17</sup> About noon, Lieutenant Abraham Furneaux, relieving the deck watch, noticed a ship to windward flying English colors and bearing down rapidly on *Hawke*. Furneaux rushed to Eliot's cabin, advised him of the approaching ship, and the captain promptly came on deck. Eliot made Sir Edward Hawke's private signal for identification, and, receiving no reply, he ordered all hands to battle stations and all sails set. Unfortunately the strange vessel easily outdistanced *Hawke* ("three feet to our one," according to the gunner) and ran up under her lee quarter, at which point she broke out the French flag and began raking *Hawke's* deck with musket-fire. Eliot's men replied with small arms but could not bring *Hawke's* guns to bear because of "the great swell of the sea." When Eliot attempted to get out the after gun to leeward, it was "washed away by the sea that came in at the port, so that it was impossible to fight any of the great guns." Nor was a close look at the Frenchman's armament heartening; she carried twenty-four eight- and twelve-pounders, and they began to flail the helpless English ship. Three men were killed at the outset, and with no effective means of answering the enemy's fire, Eliot had little choice but to consult his officers and, on their advice, strike his colors. His captor proved to be the privateer *Duc de Choiseul*,

16. ADM 10/8. Eliot's correspondence: ADM 1/1760 and ADM 2/83.

17. Eliot lost all of his papers when *Hawke* was captured: Eliot to Cleveland, April 17, 1760: ADM 1/1760. L. Carr Laughton in William L. Clowes, *The Royal Navy*, 7 vols. (London, 1897-1903), III, 311, noted *Hawke* as "taken off C[ape] Clear." The location seems unlikely in view of *Hawke's* previous assignments.

out of St. Malo, and to that port *Hawke* and her crew were taken.<sup>18</sup> On Christmas Eve, Eliot's mother wrote to her oldest son of her longing to hear that "our young Commander has come in safe." Four days later John Eliot ruefully advised the Admiralty of the sad fate of his ship.<sup>19</sup>

English prisoners of war might languish in France for many months, but not the brother of Edward Eliot and a relation of Lord Anson. On January 24, 1760, the Admiralty directed the Commissioners for Exchanging Prisoners to secure the release of John Eliot, Lieutenant Furneaux, and a passenger, Surgeon John Holden of the hospital ship *Canterbury*, "as soon as possible" and "without a moment's loss of time."<sup>20</sup> The next day the Admiralty proposed a formal exchange for these three, and the French responded on February 5, offering to trade *Hawke's* junior officers for a French pilot, Gautier de Pignon Blanc, who had been captured at Louisbourg and paroled to France. The exchange was arranged in the first weeks of March, and on the twenty-first the cutter *Cruizer* deposited nine French prisoners at St. Malo and took aboard Eliot and his servant, Lieutenant Furneaux, Surgeon Holden, four of *Hawke's* other officers, and an English lieutenant taken at Quebec. Instead of Pignon Blanc, however, the English exchanged M. de Pennandreff, first lieutenant of *Formidable*, captured at Quiberon Bay, November 20, 1759, who had suffered a headwound and was under a doctor's care. *Hawke's* crew was to be returned by the next packet-boat exchange and probably got home about April 20. At the same time Eliot was released, the senior captain at Plymouth was ordered to hold an enquiry on the loss of *Hawke*.<sup>21</sup>

The winds continued to blow ill for Eliot. Not until April 2 was he able to reach Falmouth, from whence he went overland to Plymouth for his court martial. He reached Plymouth on the sixth, and on April 8 Captain Samuel Graves convened a court aboard *Barfleur* "to enquire whether the officers and seamen

18. Details of the action are derived from the court martial record, ADM 1/5299 Pt. 1, fols. 192-196.

19. Harriot Hamilton to Edward Eliot, December 24, 1759. John Eliot's letter to the Admiralty appears to have been lost.

20. ADM 2/84.

21. *Hawke's* crew were held at Dinant. ADM 97/106 contains correspondence relating to the exchange. Secretary to Commodore Hanway, March 21, 1760: ADM 2/258.

of his Ma<sup>ty</sup>s late sloop *Hawke* did their utmost to preserve and defend her." Evidence was heard from Lieutenant Furneaux, Master John Cole, Boatswain Benjamin Steward, Gunner Walter Dewes, Surgeon John Holden, and Captain Eliot. Steward observed that "No person could behave better than Captain Eliot and each of his officers." Holden declared that Eliot had "behaved with great calmness and resolution," and the captain himself swore that all of his officers and crew had "behaved well." The court quickly concluded that as "Captain Eliot behaved like a gallant officer, and, with his officers and seamen, took every prudent measure in his power to defend and save the sloop, from an enemy of such superior force and speed, under such unfavorable circumstances, they do therefore acquit Captain Eliot, his officers and seamen of all blame and censure."<sup>22</sup>

The outcome was never really in doubt. Three days before the trial at Plymouth, the Admiralty had assigned Eliot a new ship. On April 25 he was commissioned captain, and the next day he entered *Gosport* at Sheerness, to begin Baltic convoy duty in May.<sup>23</sup>

Captain John Eliot celebrated his eighteenth birthday near the end of his first, tedious voyage between England and the Danish Sound. A second crossing of the North Sea in July was disturbed only by gale winds, and on August 6, Eliot's convoy of sixty-eight merchantmen left Elsinore for home. Storms forced the convoy to put in at Hammersound on the southeast coast of Norway, on August 11/12, however. The next day, while waiting for the winds to abate, Eliot learned that a French privateer, with two captured English snows, was anchored only six to eight miles away in Ollisound (or Wolfsound).<sup>24</sup> Applying tactics he had learned when serving with John Byron and Arthur Forrest, at 2:00 p.m., August 14, Eliot sent off his barge, long boat, and two cutters, under the command of First

22. Eliot to Secretary Cleveland, April 2, 1760: ADM 1/1760; Courts Martial: ADM 1/5299, Pt. 1, fols. 191-196.

23. For Eliot's commission see ADM 6/19 and ADM 10/13. Eliot to Cleveland, April 27, 1760: ADM 1/1760; Cleveland to Eliot, April 28, 1760: ADM 2/715; Captain's Log, *Gosport*: ADM 51/406.

24. See Sir John Norris, *A Compleat Sett of New Charts* (London, 1728). Modern Homborsund lies between Lillesund and Arendal, Norway, on the northern side of the Skagerrak between Norway and Denmark.

and Third Lieutenants Thomas Eastwood and James Cook, to seek out the Frenchman. Eliot's little flotilla found the lugsailed privateer at eight o'clock that evening. She had four heavy guns and six swivels, but the Englishmen went aboard with a rush, and "after fifteen minutes close engagement" during which *Gosport's* party suffered three killed and five wounded, they took *Marquise de Leede*, Captain Jean-Louis Jean, out of Boulogne. The French had two killed, seven wounded, including the captain. Aboard their prize the victors found a number of English seamen and two English ransomers, merchant captains, who had been taken en route from Leith to Copenhagen. On the twenty-sixth Eliot got the convoy away from the Norwegian coast and delivered his prisoners and prize ships at Yarmouth early in September. His orders took him on around to Plymouth where, on October 18, he turned over *Gosport* to Captain John Jervis.<sup>25</sup>

The six months between Eliot's departure from *Gosport* and his resumption of sea duty illustrates the manner in which the Admiralty provided for its favorite captains when active commands were unavailable. On October 13, 1760, in anticipation of the conclusion of his last convoy assignment, Eliot was commissioned to *Coventry*, at Plymouth, in the place of the ailing Captain Francis Burslem. Although he left *Gosport* October 18, Eliot did not board *Coventry*, which was refitting in the docks, until November 22, when he took her alongside the hulk at Hamoaze, and his command ended on December 3.<sup>26</sup> He was obviously well situated to enjoy the comforts of the family home at nearby Port Eliot, but a ship was necessary to justify his pay. Most conveniently, HMS *Unicorn* appeared at Plymouth, having lost her Captain Joseph Hunt in action on January 8, 1761. Eliot was sent aboard January 12 to arrange for Hunt's burial and to start the process of refitting. He held

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25. Captain's Log, *Gosport*: ADM 51/406; Lieutenant's Log, *Gosport*: ADM L/G. 79 (Natl. Maritime Mus.); Eliot to Cleveland, September 1, 1760: ADM 1/1760; Admiralty to Eliot, July 3, September 19, October 3, 1760: ADM 2/85.
26. Secretary to Burslem, October 13, 1760, Secretary to Eliot, November 24, 1760: ADM 2/716; Eliot to Cleveland, January 6, 1761: ADM 1/1760; Commission dated October 13, 1760: ADM 6/19; Captain's Log, *Coventry*: ADM 51/212.

that command until February 17.<sup>27</sup> Although he had been commissioned to his new ship, *Thames*, November 21, 1769. Eliot did not join her until March 23, 1761. Refitting was completed at Plymouth early in April, and on the eighth Eliot was instructed to put himself under the orders of John Byron in *Fame* preparatory to cruising the western approaches.<sup>28</sup>

Byron and Eliot sailed together, but *Thames* returned to Plymouth with the inbound West Indies convoy on June 14. Eliot's next assignment was with the blockading squadron off Ushant and Brest where he was employed as a messenger and was frequently engaged in close observation of the French port. On July 28, he had the good fortune to take the French West Indiaman *Unicorn* prize and with her a lucrative cargo of coffee, sugar, and indigo. The latter part of the year was uneventful, however, for French shipping had been all but destroyed by British sea power. After putting in for extensive repairs at recently-captured Belle Isle, *Thames* returned to Plymouth at the end of March 1762.<sup>29</sup>

In mid-April 1762, Captain Eliot began to receive a series of cryptic orders from the Admiralty which culminated in a sealed packet and instructions which hastened him to sea on the twenty-fourth. Fifteen leagues west of the Lizard, Eliot was allowed to discover that he had been directed to cruise between Madeira, the Canary Islands, and the Azores in the hope of surprising enemy privateers operating in an area normally free of English men-of-war. Using Funchal as his base, Eliot spent the summer on station, but found little excitement until July 21 when he fell in with two Spanish ships of the line and a frigate and was chased by them for thirteen and one-half hours. Late in November he turned homeward, stopping at Lisbon to pick up an inbound convoy and reaching Plymouth on January 2, 1763.<sup>30</sup>

27. Secretary to Eliot, January 12, 1761, Secretary to Lieutenant Symons, January 15, 1761, Secretary to Captain Charles Douglas, *Unicorn*, February 20, 1761: ADM 2/717; Captain's Log, *Unicorn*: ADM 51/3996.

28. Eliot to Stephens, March 23, 1761: ADM 1/1760; Secretary to Eliot, March 27, 1761: ADM 2/717; Admiralty to Eliot, April 8, 1761: ADM 2/86; Captain's Log, *Thames*: ADM 51/989; Lieutenant's Log, *Thames*: ADM L/T.80 (Nat. Maritime Mus.).

29. Eliot to Cleveland, June 14, 1761: ADM 1/1760; Admiralty to Eliot, June 19, July 14, 1761: ADM 2/86; Captain's Log, *Thames*: ADM 51/989; Lieutenant's Log, *Thames*: ADM L/T.80 (Nat. Maritime Mus.).

30. Admiralty to Eliot, April 13, 16, 1762: ADM 2/88; Eliot to Cleveland,

The Seven Years War was at an end Eliot had little to do in the spring of 1763 but reduce *Thames's* complement to its peacetime establishment. He spent most of his time on leave in London, and not until June was he assigned new duties. *Thames* was then ordered to convoy two regiments to Gibraltar, and Eliot was charged with the tutelage of Daniel Woltchkof, one of four Russian gentlemen training as midshipmen in the Royal Navy.<sup>31</sup>

On August 6, 1763, Eliot began a two-year stint with the Mediterranean squadron, during which time he and *Thames* did little but show the flag at Lisbon, Gibraltar, Port Mahon, and Genoa. At the latter port, May 31, 1764, Eliot briefly encountered that scholarly young gentleman Edward Gibbon, a distant relation by virtue of the marriage of Gibbon's cousin Catherine Elliston to John's brother Edward.<sup>32</sup>

A few months later Captain Eliot became the center of a minor diplomatic squall when, at Cadiz, one of his junior officers twice broke protocol by returning the salutes of Spanish men-of-war as they entered the harbor. Eliot had gone ashore, and Lieutenant Boger misconstrued his orders regarding salutes. Learning of the first incident and observing the approach of a second Spanish ship, Eliot attempted to warn Boger, but as no ship's boat was at hand to convey the captain's message, a second salute was fired. Aware of the delicacy of Spanish sensibilities, Eliot hastened to explain the cause of his embarrassment to the Spanish admiral at Cadiz. The Don seemed satisfied but felt obliged to notify his government of the Englishman's gaff. Very shortly the Spanish ambassador to St. James's was complaining to Secretary of State Halifax that Eliot had "rashly usurped a jurisdiction." The Admiralty, asked to provide an

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April 15, 20, June 3, November 24, December 29, 1762: ADM 1/1760, January 2, 1763: ADM 1/1761; Captain's Log, *Thames*: ADM 51/989.

31. Admiralty to Eliot, April 6, June 2, 11, July 8, 1763: ADM 2/90; Secretary to Eliot, April 22, May 12, 1763: ADM 2/722; Eliot's correspondence: ADM 1/1761; Captain's Log, *Thames*: ADM 51/989.

32. J. E. Norton, ed., *The Letters of Edward Gibbon* 3 vols. (New York, 1956), I, 170. Captain's Log, *Thames*: ADM 51/989 and 982. Gibbon had yet to achieve fame as the author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* or to enter the House of Commons as a member for one of Edward Eliot's pocket boroughs.

explanation, merely referred the matter to the commander-in-chief in the Mediterranean, and there the storm died.<sup>33</sup>

Eliot's otherwise pleasant routine was finally broken when the Admiralty sent orders to the Mediterranean station to dispatch either *Thames* or another vessel to convey Ambassador Henry Grenville home from Constantinople. Eliot secured the assignment on July 23, 1765, and in September he made his way from Naples to the Dardanelles, where he received a twenty-one gun salute from the Turkish forts, and on to the Golden Horn where he docked on October 4. Nine days later the ambassador and his wife came aboard, and *Thames* began the long journey home. Eliot's ship was now quite foul, and in rough weather off Malta he found that *Thames* was taking seven inches of water an hour. At Toulon, November 9, Eliot was forced to investigate the cause of the problem and discovered a serious leak under the step of the foremast. As the ship's bottom proved to be quite rotten and careening was necessary, Henry Grenville went ashore and ultimately made his way home across France. *Thames* remained for two months at Toulon. Eliot and his crew spent much of their time on shore, mingling freely and amicably with French seamen. James Boswell, who encountered Eliot at Toulon on December 20, noted with admiration the young English captain's "manly" appearance.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, on January 15, 1766, *Thames* was ready to sail, with the ambassador's baggage still aboard. Stopping briefly at Gibraltar to pick up General John Irwin's dispatches describing the great hailstorm that had recently wreaked havoc on the Rock, killing five men and eleven women and children, Eliot reached Plymouth by February 17. After two and a half years on a foreign station, *Thames's* captain and crew were understandably anxious to get ashore, but the Grenvilles's baggage imposed an automatic quarantine on the ship. Eliot fired off a letter of protest to the Admiralty, and their Lordships success-

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33. Secretary to Eliot, September 25, 1764: ADM 2/724; Eliot to Stephens, October 15, 1764: ADM 1/1761.

34. Admiralty to Thomas Harrison, June 4, 1765: ADM 2/92; Harrison to Eliot, July 23, 1765: ADM 1/1761; Captain's Log, *Thames*: ADM 51/982; Ralph S. Walker, ed., *The Correspondence of James Boswell and John Johnston of Grange* (New York, 1966), 198.

fully applied to the King to get *Thames* and her men released from quarantine. On March 11, the ship's company was paid off, Eliot struck his pendant, and *Thames* was laid up until the next threat of war.<sup>35</sup>

John Eliot was without employment from March 11 until October 24, 1766, and he enjoyed a well-deserved shore leave. At the end of October, however, he assumed command of the guardship *Firm* in the Hamoaze, Plymouth. This was normally a three-year assignment which required little of a captain whose ship was no more than a harbor workhorse and whose crew did little but "row the Guard."<sup>36</sup> Captain Eliot spent some time at Port Eliot, early in 1767, but a chain of peculiar circumstances was rapidly pulling him toward a new kind of command.

In 1763, Eliot's former shipmate George Johnstone had won appointment as governor of the newly-established British colony of West Florida. After a stormy two years at that obscure outpost of empire, Johnstone was granted leave to return home, and he left Pensacola in January 1767. Less than a month after his departure the ministry decided to remove him from office, having concluded with Lord Shelburne that his conduct had been "that of a Perfect Madman."<sup>37</sup> As policy seemed to dictate the appointment of a naval officer to the Gulf coast governorship, Shelburne suggested three names to the Earl of Chatham for that post: Captain John Campbell, Captain John Byron, and Richard, Earl Howe. This was a distinguished company; all three had sailed on Anson's famous expedition of 1740, although only Campbell had completed the circumnavigation. All had fought under Hawke during the late war, Campbell having been Sir Edward's flag captain at Quiberon Bay. Campbell, a dour Scot, was no politician, however, and Howe, holding the office of treasurer of the navy, was not apt to be tempted from a comfortable and honorable employment. Byron would later

35. Irwin to Eliot, January 31, 1766, Eliot to Stephens, February 17, 18, 1766: ADM 1/1761; Secretary to Eliot, February 21, 1766: ADM 2/726; Lieutenant's Log, *Thames*: ADM L/T. 82 (Natl. Maritime Mus.).
36. Captain's Log, *Firm*: ADM 51/356; Lieutenant's Log, *Firm*: ADM L/F. 97 (Natl. Maritime Mus.); Secretary to Captain Elphinston, *Firm*, October 24, 1766: ADM 2/726; Eliot's commission: ADM 6/20.
37. Shelburne to Johnstone, September 22, 1766 and February 19, 1767: Colonial Office 5/618, 1, 4; Shelburne to Chatham, February 16, 1767: Chatham Papers, PRO 30/8/3, f. 189.

accept a colonial governorship, but as he had just returned from his own voyage around the world in May 1766, he was not likely to welcome immediate assignment to a distant shore.

In contrast to these seasoned captains, John Eliot was a callow twenty-four-year-old who had never commanded a ship of the line-but he did possess certain important qualifications for the West Florida governorship. In 1760 his brother Edward had become a member of the Board of Trade, and in 1767 his uncle Robert Nugent was president of that body which supervised Britain's colonial affairs. Between them, Eliot and Nugent controlled perhaps ten seats in the House of Commons, and that was of great interest to the floundering ministry. From John Eliot's point of view, the peacetime navy offered little hope of advancement, but a royal governorship carried considerable prestige and a respectable salary of £1,200. The arrangement was duly concluded, and on March 16, 1767, the Earl of Shelburne advised the Board of Trade and the Admiralty that his Majesty had appointed Captain John Eliot governor of West Florida.<sup>38</sup>

Although he would be vice-admiral in his colony, Eliot's naval career was over. On May 25, the Admiralty advised him that as his new royal commission had passed the seals, he would be replaced in *Firm* by Captain Richard Hughes. His command and his naval service accordingly ended on June 11, 1767.<sup>39</sup>

It had been anticipated that John Eliot would sail for his new post immediately, but he did not-quite evidently because of political changes occurring in 1767-1768 which put an end to the Chatham administration and led to the creation of the new office of Secretary of State for the American Colonies, developments which naturally concerned the newly-appointed governor of West Florida. Although the shipment to Pensacola of some of his personal effects in the summer of 1768 heralded his coming, not until October 20 was the sloop *Tryal*, Captain William Philipps, ordered to Plymouth to convey the governor to Pensacola. Eliot passed, the last days of 1768 and his last days in

38. Shelburne to Admiralty, March 16, 1767: ADM 1/4127; Board of Trade, *Journal of the Commissioners for Trade and Plantations*, 14 vols. (London, 1920-1938) XII, 375-76.

39. Captain's Log, *Firm*: ADM 51/356; Secretary to Eliot, May 25, 27, 1767, Secretary to Capt. Richard Hughes, June 22, 1767: ADM 2/727.

England with his family at Port Eliot while Philipps stored his baggage aboard *Tryal*. When he sailed, January 6, 1769, the governor's party consisted of two couples, the elder and younger Mr. and Mrs. Francis Delbo, Henry Cuba, John Beal, and Eliot's personal secretary Philip Madge, a member of a well-known Devon family. The Atlantic crossing was marred by bad weather as far as Madeira, but the remainder of the run to St. Kitts was accomplished in less than four weeks. At his West Indian landfall Eliot seems to have purchased two Negro slaves, as Susan and Kattie were added to his party roster on March 8. Sailing from Basse Terre on the fourteenth, *Tryal* raised Santa Rosa Island on April 1, and anchored opposite Pensacola that night. On Sunday morning, April 2, John Eliot stepped ashore in his new government.<sup>40</sup>

It was subsequently reported that during the passage Eliot "was severely afflicted with a violent pain in his head" which was so totally debilitating as to "deprive him the enjoyment of any of the pleasures of this life." No earlier evidence of such a disability has been noted, although the few surviving pieces of his correspondence may be thought to show a deterioration in his handwriting. The disorder seems to have disappeared before Eliot reached Pensacola, but it soon recurred and gave "great uneasiness" to those West Floridians who had quickly come to like and respect their new governor. Eliot enjoyed a remission of this attack and "continued in good health and spirit till the first of May" when the pain struck again "with greater violence than before, and the next day it totally deprived him of his senses."<sup>41</sup> As Eliot was able to conduct the business of his office and entertain Lieutenant Governor Montfort Browne at dinner as late as May 1, the suddenness and extreme severity of these attacks seems beyond question and clearly responsible for the ensuing tragedy.

On the morning of May 2, it was discovered that John Eliot had hanged himself in his study in the Governor's House. Lieu-

40. Admiralty to Philipps, October 20, 1768: ADM 2/94; Captain's Log, *Tryal*: ADM 51/980; Muster Book, *Tyral*: ADM 36 (information provided by Dr. Thomas D. Greenhaw); Eliot to Hillsborough, April 3, 1769: C.O. 5/586: 207.

41. "Our last advices from West Florida," *Boston Chronicle*, July 17-20, 1769. I am deeply indebted to Dr. Robin F. A. Fabel for making his discovery of this account of Eliot's illness available to me.

tenant Governor Browne reported the fact to the American Secretary Lord Hillsborough, but to the public it was apparently put out that his last attack struck Eliot "as he was walking in his garden, and in a few minutes after, he was found dead."<sup>42</sup> Another account mentions "a violent apoplectic fit," and suggests that Eliot "seemed to indulge a fatal melancholy which . . . brought him to his end."<sup>43</sup> As there appears no reason to doubt the accuracy of the description of Eliot's illness, nor Browne's official report of his suicide, the inescapable diagnostic conclusion must be that John Eliot suffered, in the last year of his life, from a brain tumor, the traumatic effects of which drove him to a truly pathetic end. The Royal Navy paid its last respects to the deceased governor with a twenty gun salute from HMS *Tryal* as Eliot was buried outside the fort at Pensacola.<sup>44</sup>

John Eliot's naval career was moderately distinguished; his rapid advancement was undoubtedly abetted by his political connections, but he would not have achieved his youthful honors without the good opinions of such men as Byron, Forrest, Hawke, and Anson. His tenure as governor of West Florida won the plaudits of all who knew him, but its brevity has all but extinguished his memory. He deserves better of history and of that navy to which he devoted fifteen of his twenty-six years.

42. *Ibid.*; Rea, "John Eliot, Second Governor of West Florida," 263.

43. "New York, July 10," *Boston Chronicle*, July 17-20, 1769. A classic example of the confusion surrounding Eliot's death is the story attributed to Sir Joshua Reynolds (Prior, *Life of Edmund Malone*, 407) of how "Captain Hamilton, half-brother of . . . Lord Eliot," appointed governor of Newfoundland, became highly agitated by the prospects of his office while sailing to America, and "when he came near the shore, and saw the crowd of people ready to receive him, and heard their huzzas, it entirely overcame him, and he retired to his cabin and shot himself." It was generally reported, as in the *Georgia Gazette*, September 6, 1769, that Eliot died "very suddenly."

44. Philipps to Admiralty, May 14, 1769: ADM 1/2301; Captain's Log, *Tryal*: ADM 51/980.